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AT THE BACK OF THE HILLS

BY LADY HENRY SOMERSET

HERE at the back of the hills nothing happens. Day after day we look out at the unchanging face of our narrow world, little grassy fields where a few rough cattle graze on pasture that is mostly moss and rushes, and a sluggish stream bordered by willows winding in and out among them. Here and there in the hollows stand damp stained cottages from which men and women, gnarled like the apple-trees in their gardens, come out to labor on the poor farms. The children, wild as mountain goats, leave the hamlet early in the morning to cross the hill to the nearest school, three miles away. Once they have gone there is no sound of life. There are no young girls to be heard singing or laughing at their work: they have gone off to service or to business in the towns—that might be a thousand miles away for all we hear of their bustle and stir. The young men go, too, except a few who stay to plod as laborers on the farms and to lose their youth in monotonous days of dull, heavy work. News comes slowly over the hills, and when it does come our dull minds rarely grasp its meaning; anyway, it seldom touches us; for we have been left so long in ignorance that we have grown like the slow-moving beasts in the pastures. Yes, and we have grown coarse and brutal, too, stirred only to sluggish life by the juice of the little red apples that grow so plentifully on the old mossy trees.

Once a week a thin-voiced bell tinkles from the gray church half-way up the side of the hill, and a few of us obey its summons and join the parson at morning or evening prayer, in the cold, bare, vault-like sanctuary. The farmers' wives, an old woman or two, a pew full of giggling children: these make up the congregation—rarely any of the younger are to be seen there, for being poachers by nature the men of the parish go rabbiting on Sunday.

It is true Bill Jones used to "clean up of a Sunday evening"

and come to church. He always sat at the back, a dull, stupid-looking young man, fingering his book with rough, awkward hands. All the week he plowed, carted manure, or hauled timber over the hill with his team of horses—rising early and working late, out in all weathers, going on day after day in his dull, clodhopper way. But most Sunday evenings he came to church—tried to decipher the Psalms and sang the hymns if he knew the tune. What he took in of the rector's discourses on Rehoboam, Abijah, and Sennacherib no one knows. It is certain he heard of no more gracious personalities from the rector's teaching, for the Kingdom of God and His Christ are as little heard of in our backward parish as in Central Africa. At least no emphasis is ever placed on such eternal truths. Even the glories of the Empire pass us by, for they touch our life as little and no more than they touch the life of an Indian peasant on the steep slopes of the Himalayas.

We heard talk of war back in the summer—a terrible war we were told—when we sat down to read the county paper on Sunday afternoons, but we saw no signs of it and felt its reality only when bread went up and sugar became too dear to buy. The damsons rotted on the grass, and the women said it was a pity, they would have made good jam for the children against the winter if sugar had not been the price it was. Whatever the awful conflict away beyond the hills and across the sea might be, our dull life went on its same dull way. Bill Jones enlisted—he was almost the only physically fit man in the parish. We wondered when we heard he had gone how that slow, heavy mind would ever grasp the art of war.

Autumn came, then winter, shutting us out still more completely from the world beyond. The roads were clogged with mud; the sun set early behind the hills and long, dark nights fell.

Nothing happens here at the back of the hills. Life is all dulness and monotony, but this morning the great world outside broke in upon us—something happened at last.

Early—before the sun was up—the church bell began its melancholy music. Some one was dead. The grave-digger climbed the hill and began to dig a grave.

From every cottage in the hamlet the inhabitants came out in their bits of rusty black. Some of the women had made wreaths of Traveller's Joy and the remains of the rain-washed chrysanthemums in their gardens. And then over the hill came a baggage-wagon with a green tarpaulin top, and a company of men in khaki. As the wagon creaked down the hill we saw

inside the vivid color of the Union Jack and beneath it a coffin. Bill Jones had come back to us.

There was a pause outside the churchyard—the firing-party lined up. The soldier bearers took the coffin on their shoulders and, headed by the rector, they entered the little church.

Outside the sun burst through the clouds and shone on the vivid green of the little hummocky fields, lighting to silver the pale gray of the willows. We could hear the wheeze of the harmonium inside the church and then the voices of the strange soldiers singing “Brief life is here our portion.” The church was full, so full that some of us had to stand out in the graveyard.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The Army Chaplain’s voice was clear and distinct. Bill’s little sister began to cry.

Then suddenly we realized what had happened. The stupid clodhopper as we thought him had given his dull life for us and had lifted us out of our dulness to the great and tremendous issues beyond. He had linked our poverty-stricken hamlet to the Empire—but, far more, he had lifted our narrow lives into the wide spaces of the Kingdom of God.

The sun still shone. As the soldiers filed out of the church what a patch of color the flag made on the green grass as the coffin was laid on the ropes beside the grave! The rector stumbled through the committal prayers; Old John threw in the handful of earth—“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The church’s words were spoken—and then the army spoke. The firing-party waited. The word was given—clear and sharp the three volleys rang out. Then, clear and sharp, the word of command; the men faced toward the gate, their rifles dropped with a clang on the path. Silence a moment—and then the bugles sounded the last post across the green graves in the churchyard, across the rough fields, right to the foot of the hills that echoed back the long, clear notes.

Five minutes later the men in khaki had marched away—and the baggage-wagon climbed the hill. Yes, we have seen the war, we have shared in the fight—and now behind the hills here we are not so outcast or so desolate as we were before.

ISABEL SOMERSET.